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ABSTRACT

Networking is a process for tapping and developing energy to address a need in a more responsive fashion. Most networks are informal and invisible, but they are real nevertheless. A new person or organization changes relationships in the network. Understanding the types of network organization enables one to systematically gain access. There are six characteristic types of organizations: (1) The "open" organization is a public organization that obtains its position from the public. (2) The "optional" organization is similar except that it is open to change to accommodate any key person or situation. Its power is shared within the organization. (3) "Held" organizations are based on old school ties and reputation; power is privately allocated. (4) "Manipulated" organizations are usually unorganized in terms of criteria and process; power is privately contained, allocated, and not accommodated. (5) The "closed" organization is usually systematic and legalistic while power is controlled and private accommodations are rampant. (6) The "mixed" organization is usually a situation in flux using events to allocate power. Successful networks begin and grow when the initiator determines by scouting what approach to take, focuses on a selected activity or need, attracts other individuals and groups, holds an open meeting, permits continuous access to outsiders, assesses needs for new programs, reviews activities, and rewards supporters of the network. Network building for education in communities requires the patience and persistence to tap existing energy and resources; consequently, the quality and extent of a program comes from the membership of the network. (DMT)

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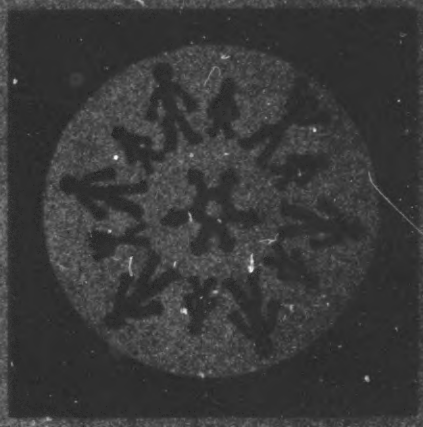

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ISSUES AND PATTERNS FOR COMMUNITY NETWORKING

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Issues and Patterns for Community Networking

A. Introduction

As education dollars become more restricted, school persons have begun to look out into the community to identify resources, support, and clout. In a very few instances some school persons have sought to identify needs and patterns to meet these needs which would require and depend on a formal or informal arrangement between and among the community and the schools. As more educators move into the community the technique of network development becomes an approach that intrigues and interests. This paper attempts to discuss networking as it occurs in communities. Much of what we know works comes from political action campaigns. Yet often in education, our intent is not politics; our intent is program development. We find it difficult to accept political jargon as independent of political coloration.

In this paper, networking is defined as a process for tapping and developing energy to address a need in a more responsive fashion.

B. Issues

Whenever a person moves out from a circumscribed and well defined role, responsibility or domain into a new environment such as a community, this new kid on the block changes connections, links, relationships that are in the community. Most persons feel that their presence assures recognition, access, support. The reality of the situation is that the actual connections and connectors will continue much the same way unless some motivation is made visible to the connectors to encourage them to change. There is a network in the community and in the school. It probably is informal and invisible, but it is real. The new kid on the block can choose to tap, disrupt, connect, change the network.

The quality of the choice depends often on tolerances by the individual members of the network, not on the pressure of the outsider.

Networks develop when Access is allowed, attained, obtained, taken. The how access occurs is not as crucial as the what is gained at access question. The purpose of access is not just to get in, it is more to gain credibility, domain, and role. Credibility relates to the belief by others that one belongs, one will be around, one has something to give. Domain relates to the belief by others that one has a constituency, has a moral or legal position which serves a given group no matter its actual number. Role relates to the belief by others that one has expertise or can perform a function that is useful to the group. Networks allow others in who demonstrate they will be there so they had best be defined in, who have backers, and who can serve a function even if it be that of scribe, or link to new knowledge or power or a different link to knowledge or power. People create or allow networks to grow when access to each other increases the information, clout, connections, visibility the individuals have and the group has.

In many instances, access is allowed differentially to individuals and to organizations. Existing networks may allow an organization in and tolerate the individual they have to work with. Other times existing networks allow individuals in for what they bring and tolerate the organization the person belongs to. When one is on the outside moving in, one should present both personal and organizational faces to allow for capture on either or both dimensions.

In some instances as in the following chart enough information is available to allow a person or group to select the mode of entry with the highest probability of success.

SITUATIONS: type of organization	CHARACTERISTICS: (1) criteria and decision making (2) power allocation	MODE OF ENTRY: personal	exploratory meeting	credibility of experience	credibility of expertise
open	(1) public, consistent, followed (2) power publicly allocated		X	X	(X)
optional	(1) same as open except will change to accommodate key person or situation (2) power accommodated or shared		(X)	X	
held	(1) old school ties - person, history, place, reputation (2) power privately allocated	(X)			
manipulated	(1) usually "mushy" on criteria and often on process (2) power privately contained, allocated and not accommodated	X	X	X	X
closed	(1) systematic, legalistic, good situation to learn from if ego under control, everything will be done correctly (2) power controlled and private accommodations rampant	(X)		X	
mixed	(1) usually a situation in flux, events often used to allocate power (2) power not allocated	X	(X)		X

(X) = preferred mode of entry
X = usual mode of entry

Networks grow through communication. Members of networks use networks to share information, to seek out information, and sometimes to send out information. The network is used as a channel for collecting information, for influencing (positively or negatively) another, for trying out ideas, for testing limits of accommodation.

Many persons new to networks perceive them as support systems to be built as advocacy groups for a cause. While many networks will advocate, their major role is more to serve as the telephone system that assumes support by individuals or groups because of what they know and what they need to know. Coordinating councils are often perceived of as support and agreement generating mechanisms. Often they are more arenas to air positions, issues, ideas than arrangements to reach consensus. The process of communication in networks is often oblique and haphazard. Even newsletters and minutes are communication processes that provide feedback and recognition not program. On the other hand, a mature network will agree to share (communicate) address and phone files and in rare instances resource person files. If a network reaches this point of trust, the persons in it place high value on the information, clout, resources the network delivers and holds promise to continue to deliver.

Such effective networks have moved beyond communication to Program. Program development requires the agreement to allocate turf, domain, function. These accommodations can be public or informal. In functioning networks the fact of accommodation is more important than the public acknowledgement. What tests the quality of the program is the actual outcomes delivered to the network and to each part of the network. In a political campaign who gets elected to what and gets what appointments demonstrates the outcomes. In a community based program in education concerns usually focus more on: who decides, who hires persons, who gets the courses.

Networks tend to be accommodations for program development where adaptations of inventions are valued. Since a large number of different persons or organizations need to be served by a program, the unique invention which may well answer the need will because of its uniqueness not carry enough known and familiar characteristics to accommodate agreement. Joint projects are creatures designed by committees; as such they have appendages that decrease efficiency and purity but increase commitment. Programs that enhance network growth require tolerance by someone or some organization. In many instances the tolerances are around pace of change and who will have what jobs.

Once a network has developed program, it should seek to have at least two types of activity. One type of activity should allow as many as want to to participate; another type of activity should allow for efficient and rapid productivity and identity for the network. The subtle balance between these two types of activities will build the support for the network as network.

Networks have Support when individuals or organizations take their own initiative to share power, resources, information with the network to assure its continuation. Sharing with the network as distinct from with or among persons or organizations becomes a significant observable action in the environment. Boundaries are crossed by arrangements for sharing and for facilitating network growth in addition to individual growth. Network roles such as linker, communicator, catalyst, connector are sanctioned by the group.

Networks continue to grow when they develop follow-up activities. As individuals and groups organize and act, they agree to take into their normal operating procedures some of the patterns or roles developed at the network. For example if an advocate activity has produced a law, the members implement the law. If an information activity has produced a plan, the members implement the plan of action or develop procedures for acting in their own organization or role.

Some believe that networks are the constant of a social environment. Community and school cooperation is simply a conscious effort at a given point in time to energize or tap a network. There is evidence that when people, organizations, or common purpose leave or pass on the network continues to provide a pattern for communication and credibility at least to help sort out the subtle boundaries of turf and roles in the communities we live in.

C. Patterns

Some rather discrete steps exist that someone seeking out or trying to build networks should consider. The steps assume a willingness to act rather than to wait patiently for absorption. The steps assume some insight into reading welcome from persons, organizations or networks.

1. Scouting

   The first activity in network connecting or building is to scout the environment. Scouting not only tells one who is visible and probably part of a network but also lets the network members know someone is around trying to get in. The focus of scouting is to identify an entry point or a person one can start building with.

2. Focusing

   The second activity is to review the results of scouting to determine a need, bridge, issue, gap, resource, or target which could form the basis for connecting the persons or organizations into a network. The selection of the focus should be differential rather than exclusive. A listing of possibilities is more appropriate than a priority ranking at this point.

3. Connecting

   By talking about or presenting a focus with an individual or group selected as the entry or who have invited participation one begins

to build an accommodation. Connecting occurs when an agreement is reached whereby each party agrees at least to meet again on a focus or issue.

4. Group Building

The parties who have agreed to work together can now set about adding members to the group seeking out persons or organizations with interest in the focus who by their presence would

(a) increase credibility

(b) add constituency

(c) connect to power and resources.

The task at this point is to find ways of including more and more persons whether they are known or unknown to all parties.

5. Open Meeting

A crucial step in network development is an open meeting. Open should define the attendance, the quality of discussion and within some limitations the agenda. The focus for the network should energize the agenda but not be used to limit or constrain discussion or direction. The more open and clarifying the meeting the more inclusive and supportive to network building it will be. Even when a focus seems to require immediate advocacy, the open meeting should provide a forum which respects and acknowledges the views and interests of non-advocacy types.

6. Continuous Access

A major concern for the network development must be a continuous acceptance of access by and involvement by individuals or groups even if they are suspected of hostile intentions. Shared information and process does much to contain attempts to subvert or block an effort in a network setting. For some reason the normative behavior in a network helps diminish non-cooperative behavior.

7. Selecting an Activity

Early in its life a network should agree to a major visible activity that tests the interest in and viability of the focus it has chosen. The usual form for this activity is a conference. The conference must be seen as having two purposes: (a) to inform, discuss, analyze a topic, and (b) to identify persons, organizations and resources that relate to the topic. Just doing the activity will surface strengths and weaknesses of the potential network.

8. Doing the Activity

The common activity should be held even if only the existing network persons attend. The conference will provide a context for mutual support, goal and purpose clarification as well as need and gap identification. Doing the activity will also provide a test for the quality of support and skill in the network.

9. Assess Activity

The network group must take the time to go over the common activity to determine (a) who helped how, and (b) what "new" needs, gaps, resources, focuses can be identified. It is less important to critique the impact of the conference on the behavior of the participants than to critique the conference in terms of its building supportive relationships.

10. Selecting Targets

The assessment should result in a decision for the network to energize new programs. These programs should be of two types:

(a) active - such as an advocacy program for changing a law

(b) passive - such as a needs assessment.

Both active and passive programs should be legitimate to assure areas for involvement for all potential members of the network group. Many

persons will not join unless they see a visible active program, as many others will not join unless they see a quiet patient evolutionary approach. The network needs both types to assure continuity and survival when under attack.

11. Review

The network will continue to grow if it assures itself that it continues to assess its activity, assures access by all interested parties, expands its constituency, continually redirects its energies to other facets of its focus, and provides credit or reward formally and informally for those who support the development of the network.

Conclusion

Most educators fear working with the community. Many fear the accusation of mixing schools and politics or of building a voter support group. Building a network does not assure one of support for a position or idea, it only assures one of finding a common focus and common program which serves the needs of the members of the network. The quality and extent of the program will come from the membership of the network. The more extensive and representative the membership the more comprehensive the program and goal. The more systematic and explicit the network process the more impactful the program on the life and actions of the community. Openness, democracy, and need responsiveness require continual nurture. Network building for education in communities requires the patience and persistence to tap the existing energy and resources with programs that connect the visions and hopes of all within a context of equity, equality and respect.

NEPTE's experience is that open network building is possible if one respects the accommodations in existing networks. One must have the patience to add

one's own agenda and concern slowly to the mix. Tapping existing networks takes a long time and a willingness to compromise; the rewards are access to more extensive and pervasive forces.